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The Writers, Artists, Singers, and Musicians of the National Hungarian Jewish Cultural Association (OMIKE), 1939–1944

Frederick Bondy

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**The Writers, Artists, Singers, and Musicians
of the National Hungarian Jewish Cultural
Association (OMIKE), 1939–1944**

Edited by Jenő Lévai

Expanded English edition edited by Frederick Bondy

Translated by Anna Etawo

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Contents

Foreword to the English Edition <i>Magda Horák</i>	xi
Foreword to the Hungarian Edition <i>Jenő Lévai</i>	xvii
Editor's Note to the English Edition <i>Frederick Bondy</i>	xix
Introduction to the English Edition <i>István Deák</i>	1
Chapter 1. The OMIKE Theater in Goldmark Hall	21
Samu Stern, President of the Jewish Religious Community of Pest "The Cultural Mission of Hungarian Jewry Is to Ensure the Existence of the Artistic Enterprise" 22	
Géza Ribáry "About Those Who Fulfill and Those Who Fail to Fulfill Their Obligations" 24	
Hugó Csörgő Quoting Géza Ribáry 25	
Chapter 2. The OMIKE Artistic Enterprise	29
The Leadership 29	
The Director 30	
Economic Structure of the Artistic Enterprise 31	
Official Duties and Regulations 31	
Artistic Duties 32	
Programming 32	
The OMIKE's Company 33	
Casting 34	

Chapter 3. The Drama Company	37
The Artistic Director and Dramaturgist (Playwright)	37
OMIKE's Most Successful Writers: Hugó Csérgő, Dezső Kellér, Jenő Mohácsi, Ferenc Molnár, and Ernő Szép	39
The Artists Associated with the OMIKE Artistic Enterprise and Others Involved in Theatrical Operations	53
The Main Director of the Drama Company	56
Notable Members of the Drama Ensemble:	
Gyula Bartos, Lajos Gárdonyi, Lajos Gellért, József Gonda, Klári Lakos, Béla Lénárd, György Nagy and Kató Bán, Béla Ormos, Erzszi Palotai, Judit Párdányi, Sándor Radó, Alíz Rajna, Imre Rádai (Ráday), Magda Rosti (Rosty), Sándor Rott, Béla Salamon, Aladár Sarkadi, Zsuzsa Simon, Ibolya Solt, Dr. Dezső Szabó, Kálmán Szentiványi, Vilmos Szirmai, Ferike Vidor, and Kálmán Zátony	57
Chapter 4. Musical Life in the OMIKE Artistic Enterprise	97
The List of Artists Performing in Musical Events (Opera, Concert, Operetta)	97
The Musical Direction of the OMIKE	98
Conductors of the OMIKE	100
The Vocal Artists of the OMIKE Artistic Enterprise:	
Dezső Ernster, Sándor Farkas, Pál Fehér, Kató Gergely, Mancsi Herendi, Oszkár Kálmán, Ilona Ladányi, Andor Lendvay, The Ney Family, Erzszi Radnai, Gabriella Relle, Vera Rózsa, and Annie Spiegel	103
Known and Unknown Heroes of the Orchestra	122
Chapter 5. The Technical Operation of the OMIKE Artistic Enterprise	125
The Auditorium	125
The Stage	126
The Invisible Actors	128
Preparing for the Show	130
Chapter 6. A Few Interesting Statistical Data	135
Afterword to the English Edition	137
<i>Péter Bársony</i>	
Acknowledgments to the English Edition	149
<i>Frederick Bondy</i>	
Appendix 1. Photographs of Goldmark Hall, Performances, and OMIKE Artists	153

Appendix 2. Programs of <i>Művészakció</i> Plays, Concerts, Operas, Cabaret, and Operettas	183
Appendix 3. Announcements of Fine Arts Expositions for Painters, Graphic Artists, and Sculptors	207
Appendix 4. OMIKE <i>Művészakció</i> Victims of the Holocaust	213
Glossary to the English Edition <i>Zvi Erenyi</i>	217
Contributors to the Hungarian Edition	231
Contributors to the English Edition	233
Bibliography	237
Index	241

1

The OMIKE Theater in Goldmark Hall

When we talk about the OMIKE Artistic Enterprise (*Művészakció*), we should remember the birth of the Goldmark Hall, where Jewish artists, having been forbidden to perform elsewhere, found a home and a chance to perform.

In the last decades of the nineteenth century, the Jewish primary school located in the wing of the present headquarters of the Jewish Religious Community of Pest on Wesselényi Street also served cultural purposes. Until the foundation of this school, at the corner of Wesselényi Street and Nagyatádi Szabó István Street, little school boys and girls studied at its predecessor. In 1920, the community started a large construction program. It included the restoration of the beautiful synagogue on Dohány Street and the construction of the Temple of Heroes to serve as an eternal memorial. Behind its archway, the Jewish Museum was also established. The old school's site on Wesselényi Street was now devoted to a cultural center. The rabbinate office was established on the ground floor, the communal tax office on the first floor, and the huge cultural hall on the second floor was devoted to larger meetings, festive gatherings, free university presentations, and cultural performances. The name of the artistically designed ceremonial hall commemorates the world renowned Jewish composer, Károly Goldmark.

The cradle of the youth movements rocked in Goldmark Hall. Within its walls, cultural performances were held in succession, which were followed by others in the city's districts. Later, youth groups presented plays here.

When Jewish artists were not allowed to perform anymore in theaters, an idea emerged that Goldmark Hall could serve as a home and a stage for them. In 1939, definite steps were taken by the Social Working Committee to implement the plan. Subsequently, the realization of the OMIKE Artistic Enterprise can be attached to the name of Dr. Géza Ribáry. He put an enormous amount of energy into this matter of high importance. He created this refuge for Jewish artists literally overnight.

The leadership of the Jewish Religious Community of Pest recognized the great significance of the initiative and gave its full support for the realization of

the project. In November 1939, authorization was granted to the OMIKE Artistic Enterprise by the Minister of Education, Bálint Hóman; the Home Secretary, Ferenc Keresztes-Fischer; and by the police, as well, to start its activities.

Samu Stern, President of the Jewish Religious Community of Pest

"The cultural mission of Hungarian Jewry is to ensure the existence of the Artistic Enterprise"

The ceremonial speech of the President of the Jewish Religious Community of Pest, Samu Stern, at the opening ceremony of the fourth season of OMIKE:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The task that I have undertaken by giving an introductory speech at the opening evening of this year's season of the Artistic Enterprise is unusual for me and might not even suit me. It is unusual because I normally give speeches on other matters such as religious, public, or economic life. Here, on this stage, the artist has the right to speak, while the place for us, the audience, is down there in the auditorium. Our voice can only be the echo that resonates in our hearts, expressed externally in applause for the performances of the artists. It is us, the audience, who should be grateful and thank the Artistic Enterprise for making us forget our daily sorrows and enjoy the art—even if it's only through acting—by making us smile or even cry with a good feeling in these dark times.

This Artistic Enterprise was regarded by many, especially at the beginning, as one of the charities that are unfortunately so needed these days. They thought that since so many writers, actors, singers, and musicians had lost their jobs, through which they could express their art and could make a living, they needed to be assisted. Which hurts more: losing earnings or the ability for self-expression? In my opinion: for real artists art is above all. They would rather face hardship and put up with less in order to pursue their artistic ambitions.

Therefore, this Artistic Enterprise achieves the most beautiful and noble mission for our unemployed artists by not only giving them a chance to earn their modest bread but also by providing a place for them to perform. It makes it possible for them to express and demonstrate their God-given talents and to spice up the piece of bread thus acquired with our applause. The Artistic Enterprise in this sense is about art rather than charity, although it is charitable to the extent that it is beneficial for us when we fly away on the wings of art from our everyday problems. It is not we who give to our art-

ists, rather the artists are the ones giving to us, because we can never offer as much as they can, since they give the greatest gift: the beauty of art. Let's accept this gift with love and be grateful for it.

I believe that in supporting this Artistic Enterprise, providing a place for it and generously making it possible for a growing audience to benefit from its beauty and goodness, the community of Pest fulfills a spiritual mission for its members. By offering the Goldmark Hall to the Artistic Enterprise we give a place to Hungarian Jewish culture and I declare that it is the cultural duty and obligation of the community of Pest, of all Hungarian Jewry, to ensure its existence and development, not only to provide a livelihood for our artists, but also to offer a spiritual experience for us, the cultured Hungarian Jewish audience, who can enjoy performances which live up to our high expectations. I hope that the example of the community of Pest will influence the communities in the countryside. They also have cultural obligations: to welcome this Artistic Enterprise as often as possible and to launch similar actions.

The experiences and the results of past artistic seasons speak for themselves. We can all be proud of the performances at this place. And you, ladies and gentlemen, are on a cultural mission by embracing this Artistic Enterprise. Spread the news of this initiative and get new patrons for Hungarian Jewish art, since this project is not able to sustain itself from the regular membership fees because of the limited seating capacity of the hall. Just like the large national opera houses which maintain their standards thanks to the sacrifices of the friends of the opera, we also need more and more friends so that a growing audience can benefit from the artistic beauty provided by this Artistic Enterprise.

I expect and demand from the leading classes of our society to set a good example in this regard. I expect all those who have kept aloof from the Artistic Enterprise to join us, as friends, since the performances have reached such a high level of artistic quality. It cannot be accepted as an excuse if someone says that he doesn't go out at all. Even if you don't go out in general, you must come here and even if you have a regular place to go to, then you must also try this one.

Come and see for yourselves that, although we cannot offer plush armchairs, sumptuous decoration and pomp, or a revolving stage and complete stagecraft, our theatrical culture is still of high standards and, in this modest setting, the pearl of art shines.

That's all I wanted to say, ladies and gentlemen. This is why I was ready to give a season-opening speech: to be able to share with you, as the head of your community, the President of the Jewish Religious Community of Pest, my commitment to the moral and spiritual value of this enterprise.

Géza Ribáry

"About those who fulfill and those who fail to fulfill their obligations"

Dr. Géza Ribáry, the first president of the Cultural Committee of the OMIKE, said the following shortly before his sudden tragic death:

Let's see how our artists and society have complied with their obligations concerning this Artistic Enterprise. It is up to the audience to decide whether our artists have done their best in serving the Artistic Enterprise with their God-given talents. The answer is generally "yes," for my part, to the other question: regarding whether Jewish Hungarian society has fulfilled its obligation towards the Artistic Enterprise, since it is thanks to the society that we are here. However, I have to mention that, although many fulfilled their duty well, and some much more than expected, there were and still are those who, completely and incomprehensibly and despite belonging to the spiritual or financial aristocracy, refrain from supporting our cultural aspirations and from aiding us.

I read the following truth in the text of a recently given speech by Dr. Kálmán Molnár, an academic professor at the Royal University of Pécs:

Everything is interconnected. The dazzling light that shines in our eyes from one of the stars or from the stage—the sound wave emanating from the stage to us or the one that is breathed into the air on the other side of this space; thoughts and acts, and not only great acts, but ordinary manifestations as well, all have lasting effects.

A bright smile, an encouraging word, a supportive act, making a sacrifice; all have effects, all excite and strengthen, stimulate, vibrate in the souls touched and determine walks of life. In this way, it can happen that they concentrate as a factor to shape history.

For this reason, I would like to thank all the patrons and friends of this Artistic Enterprise and our kind audience for their friendship and support by referring to the fact that while you are enjoying yourselves here, satisfying your cultural needs, supporting our artists, your sacrifice and applause also have an effect. They excite and strengthen, stimulate and vibrate in the souls touched, thus they concentrate as a factor to shaping our future and hopes.

I must cite another truth from the speech of this outstanding professor at the University of Pécs. It goes like this:

Everybody's responsible, responsible for the never-ending series of events that he initiated with his words, movements or actions, even for those which he failed to initiate because he was too lazy or too idle to do good.

I draw the attention to its responsibility of that segment of Jewish Hungarian society which has failed to support our cultural aspirations and to aid us, to its responsibility, in the hope that recognition of its responsibility will be enough incentive to make it comply with its obligation in the future—hopefully already in this season.

When I talk about those who haven't fulfilled their obligations, I also have to mention someone who stands out by having done more than expected. From the first moment, he has appreciated our efforts more than anyone else. He has supported us with great enthusiasm and put all his energy into the realization and development of the Artistic Enterprise. I speak about the president of an association called The Friends of the OMIKE Artistic Enterprise, who is also the President of the Jewish Religious Community of Pest and leader of Hungarian Jewry.

Thanks to Samu Stern, we managed to overcome the financial and legal hurdles to realize the Artistic Enterprise. He gave a venue to the Artistic Enterprise, and we thank him for its artistic restoration. He was the one who convinced the board of the community that the foremost community of the country must support the Artistic Enterprise. He was the one who made Hungarian Jewish society feel responsible for the Artistic Enterprise, through his active involvement in acquiring financial assistance from patrons, founding members and friends. Through his regular visits to our performances and through his encouragement of the leading segment of Jewish society to come and see the performances. Not only are the performances of the Artistic Enterprise on a high standard today, but its audience is as well.

Hugó Csergő

Quoting Géza Ribáry

It's been a year since he left us.¹ But as the far sky shines purple long after the sun has already set, so the spirit of our deceased friend keeps on radiating warmth and light in this hall. Everything is filled with him. The diversity of colors on the posters in the lobby, the portraits of artists on the staircase, the gold monogram of Goldmark above the door, the warm burgundy tone of the walls and windows, the arrangement of the chairs as they are lined up behind one another, the worn cyclorama of the stage and the painted canvas of the coulisse—all, all remind us of him, all, all are impregnated with his memory.

In the limelight, which illuminates his portrait, he comes to life again—he is alive and speaks. He speaks in a slightly mocking, slightly teasing way that hides his deep empathy, with a little skeptical smile on his lips, which suggests his worries inside him. Whether or not the feeling flowing towards him is real,

his eyes still glisten with fever, inflamed by his seething spirit, which heated the forge of his mind till the last flicker. He says the following: "Thank you for thinking of me. Thank you for still remembering me." And we answer: "Géza Rébáry, all of us here and elsewhere are and will be one with you in spirit and in our memories":

We thank you, Géza Ribáry, that you existed. Thank you for your creative works in which you put of yourself, in such a way that they survive you and you, yourself, survive in them and live on through them. Thank you for the thoughts and beauty you gave us—the thought which you realized in the idea of the OMZSA and the beauty which you passed on to us in the form of the Artistic Enterprise.²

The solidarity, the thought of sharing our fate: the idea of the OMZSA which you planted in our hearts and memories then turned into action so that they are followed by good deeds in these dark times and value is created in bleak circumstances.

And the beauty of the illusion: the beauty that you left us in the OMIKE Artistic Enterprise—the beauty of the illusion which weaves a veil of imagination around reality and which through play makes us forget about our lives and which by the magic of art takes us to a world we wish for, far from the one from which reality now excludes us.

He gave us the most beautiful thing which creative imagination can give: a toy for the child that we are and we will be, till we die. When we are on the verge of bursting into tears, we begin to smile, even today, when we hear the jingle of the fool's cap which you shook and which continues to ring even now when your arm is already stiff. Just as in olden days when we heard our mother's lullaby chase away lurking monsters of the night, so we now are relieved of the nightmare when we hear the sublime majesty of Beethoven in this hall or when Verdi's sentimentality softens into a deep low voice or when the melting silver of Puccini's arias flows in all directions or when we hear Offenbach's naughty rhythms bouncing. Thus through this sonorous flow of sounds and colors the disharmony of our lives melts into balsamic harmonies. All that is bad outside vanishes inside in this Goldmark Hall, the cradle of which you, Géza Ribáry, rocked and in which we now rock in a musical cradle and dream of a life that reality can never replace.

You established a stage for our artists, for whom the stage is everything, and you created a stage for us for whom only performance can give the illusion of life.

Who says that you died when the rhymes of the dead poet can be heard on this stage just as much as those of the live poet? How could Bach's fugues, Mozart's melodies, which you also brought to life so many times, become silent while there is a stage and a musician to play the piano? Only the tran-

sient part is lost of the man, but the spirit which created something timeless will last and lives on in his work.

Your spirit, Géza Ribáry, lives in the ideals of thought and beauty. When we pay tribute to you on this stage with our modest, quiet words, we do not mourn but glorify your everlasting memory. In honor of your glorified memory we perform a masterpiece of the immortal Beethoven, instead of singing funeral hymns, to unite in the endless beauty of music so that your spirit finds its way to our heart and doesn't enclose your memory in a coffin but rocks it as a cradle into the nicer future of our life-giving dreams, where the radiant bridge of your works leads us.

We answer this to you, Géza Ribáry, when you smile thankfully at us from your picture for remembering you.

And we just add:—"Good"—We remember you. "Good," we think of you. Artists, authors, painters, sculptors, the audience; we are with you and we will always remember you.

Ladies and gentlemen, let's rise for a moment and think of him, in silence, without a word. Only for a few moments. And now let us fondly and quietly whisper his name like this: Géza Ribáry, Géza Ribáry, we will follow you till we die, stay with us, stay with us . . . !"

Notes on the Translation

1. Speech given at the Ribáry Memorial Evening of the OMIKE Artistic Enterprise, circa May 1943. Dr. Géza Ribáry died of natural causes on May 9, 1942.
2. OMZSA–Országos Magyar Zsidó Segítő Akció (National Hungarian Jewish Aid Organization).